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RUMIAAA/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL IMMEDIATE
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RUEAHND/CDRJTFB SOTO CANO HO IMMEDIATE
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEABND/DEA HQS WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
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TAGS: [KCRM](#) [KHLS](#) [MARR](#) [MCAP](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [SMIG](#) [SNAR](#)
SOCI, HO
SUBJECT: ZELAYA ADMINISTRATION AT THE MIDPOINT: SECURITY
ISSUES

REF: A. TEGUCIGALPA 96
[1](#)B. TEGUCIGALPA 138
[1](#)C. 07 TEGUCIGALPA 1678

Classified By: Ambassador Charles Ford, Reasons 1.4 (b & d)

[1](#)1. (U) Summary. In the fall of 2005, Embassy Country team engaged in an off-site exercise to determine the USG priorities in Honduras, dividing them into five categories. This cable, third in a series, analyzes Manuel Zelaya's administration at the midpoint in regards to one of those priorities: security. We divided this broad issue into five areas/goals: 1) transform the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF); 2) reform/increase capacity of the National Police; 3) reduce transnational trafficking of all kinds; 4) destroy small arms/light weapons; and 5) safeguard U.S. mission at Soto Cano airbase. We have made significant progress on assisting the HOAF in transforming into a more flexible organization that can cooperate with the United States to counter transnational threats. The HOAF are now one of the most respected institutions in the country, and we believe we will soon see them participating in international peacekeeping efforts. Transforming the police force has proved more problematic, as they continue to be plagued by corruption and inefficiency, but our efforts are making inroads, for example, by improving the police academy and encouraging the passage of a new police law. We have destroyed some small arms/light weapons when the GOH requests assistance, but still do not have a handle on the full inventory of arms in the country. And finally, we were able to push back on attempts by the Zelaya administration to commercialize the airstrip at Soto Cano airbase, although we believe the issue can arise again at any time. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Honduras and the United States confront a number of transnational threats, including arms and drug trafficking, international terrorism, and organized crime. Honduras is a prime transit point for the smuggling of goods and people.

Additionally, in all public polls regarding issues of concern to the Honduran public, security, both national and personal, continues to rank either #1 or #2. Through police and military training, and the provision of appropriate equipment, the United States is working together with the GOH to improve security for Honduras and the region, and through that work, improve the security of the United States.

Transform the HOAF

13. (C) Historically, the Honduran Armed Forces (HOAF) have focused on deterring conventional armed forays from neighboring countries. However, this is not a significant threat and our overall objective is to assist the HOAF in its transformation into a more flexible organization that can cooperate with the United States to counter transnational problems that threaten both countries and the region as a whole. To achieve this, the following objectives were established:

a) Publication of Honduran National Security Strategy. On September 10, 2007, the GOH publicized a decree in the national Gazette announcing the adoption of a National Security Strategy. The strategy addresses terrorism; money laundering; gangs; trafficking of drugs, arms, and people; consolidation of borders; regional cooperation; and modernization of GOH security institutions to face the challenges of the 21st century. The National Council on Defense and Security (Consejo Nacional de Defensa y Seguridad) will be re-invigorated and tasked with coordinating not only the interpretation of the strategy, but also its dispersal to the general public. This was a significant achievement; however, five months have now passed

and no further action has been taken to educate the Congress on the importance of the strategy, coordinate its implementation, or disseminate it to the public.

b) Continued Force Restructuring Efforts. The HOAF has achieved moderate success in converting inappropriate forces into units specifically designed to counter transnational threats. There has been an emphasis on peace-keeping operations, disaster relief, and counter-drug operations. The USG is providing the HOAF with appropriate training and military equipment, including efficient aircraft and naval vessels, to assist in their transformation. The GOH has progressed far enough in its peacekeeping training that the Honduran Ambassador to the United Nations sent a letter in January 2008 to the UN Secretary General offering Honduran troops for peacekeeping operations in Haiti. We are trying to convince the Hondurans to send a more general offer of support that does not specify the country they would like to send their troops. The USG is also assisting the HOAF in its efforts to put more emphasis on the use of the Navy to halt trafficking in drugs and arms, by training personnel and upgrading the facilities at the new Naval Base in Barra de Caratasca on the north coast. Although the HOAF has been receptive to this assistance and has reported improved operations, specifically on the north coast, they have been resistant to the strategic realignment of their military bases and have not closed any of them, which would be a necessary step for their transformation. Another area in which the HOAF has resisted change is in the reduction in number of its upper rank officers. Additionally, the HOAF has still not agreed to turn in its fighter jets, which are not suited to a flexible force.

c) Training to Support Transformation Efforts. The development of non-commissioned officers (NCOs) is improving in all services of the HOAF. This is partly due to political will on the part of the HOAF and partly due to USG efforts through assistance to the NCO academy which was created six years ago in response to a USG recommendation to place NCOs in key positions.

Reform/Increase Capacity of National Police

14. (C) Public opinion polls show that Hondurans consider the

security situation to be worsening and that they place the blame on the government, particularly the police. Corruption is cited as a principal factor in the poor performance of the police. More and more attention is being paid to security and corruption in the press. The situation is of extreme concern to the public but the GOH stands out for its lack of response. One important objective is the passage of the reforms to the organic police law. These reforms would strengthen the police units and Internal Affairs, allowing for mandatory polygraph exams and drug tests on all police officers to remove those with links to gangs and organized crime, as well as authority to fire police who have committed crimes. The U.S. Embassy has given our input to individual members of Congress, the Minister of Security, and the members of the Civil Society commission who advises the Minister of Security. The Honduran Congress continues to debate the reforms, and they are not expected to pass until mid-2008.

15. (C) Another objective is the completion of the National Automated Case Management Information System (NACMIS). By mid-March 2008, the final phase of this INL-sponsored project to extend NACMIS to key areas of the country will be completed. Officers from all police directorates have access to the system which allows them to share criminal information in real time. Reports from the police themselves, as well as other international donor agencies, are extremely positive

and show improved law enforcement results. The European Union expressed interest in funding further expansion of the project to more remote areas of the country.

16. (C) The assignment of a U.S. advisor to the police academy is another of the set objectives. Post has worked closely with the Ministry of Security on the details of the assignment. Funding has been approved and the arrival of the advisor is expected for March 2008.

17. (C) To assist in improving the capability of the National Police, new INL funding will be aimed at drug interdiction, hiring of the aforementioned police academy advisor, provision of communications equipment, implementation of a ballistics system, anti-gang initiatives, police training, and other law enforcement support. The much needed funding from the Merida Initiative, if passed by Congress, would contribute to an improved police force in the areas of counternarcotics and border security, public security and law enforcement, and institution building and rule of law.

Reduce Transnational Trafficking

18. (C) The GOH, with the support of POL, INL, ICE, RSO, DEA, DOD, and TAT, is making improvements in its capacity to interdict drugs, arms, people, and counterfeit goods. However, as the Governments of Mexico and Guatemala continue to crack down on trafficking operations, the traffickers look for the most vulnerable areas in which to conduct their operations. Therefore, although the police and HOAF are receiving top-notch training and improved equipment, they still do not have the capacity to successfully confront on their own the increased use of Honduras as a transit point. Drug prevention campaigns and programs are almost non-existent, the recently terminated Frontier Police K-9 Program had questionable results and operational difficulties, and information-sharing among regional partners is limited. Much work still must be done to reduce transnational trafficking. A key element would be political will at the highest levels.

Destroy Small Arms/Light Weapons

19. (C) The USG oversaw the destruction of over 12,000 weapons and over 60,000 bombs and rounds of ammunition just in the last year. The USG has responded to several specific requests by the GOH for assistance in destruction, but we do not have a full inventory of the present arms in country. For example, DAO was told by their HOAF contacts in October 2007 about a possible large cache of arms in the Gracias a

Dios region and in response, offered USG assistance in inventory and possible destruction. To date, we have not received any more information or any request for help.

Safeguard U.S. Mission at Soto Cano

¶10. (C) During the 2005 Presidential campaign, Zelaya pledged to commercialize the airstrip at Soto Cano airbase at Palmerola. This issue has reared its head periodically over the years. In September 2007, Chief of Defense (CHOD) Romeo Vasquez Velasquez approached us to ask that we re-start the talks per the request of President Zelaya. On October 18 (ref C) a team from the Embassy met with representatives from the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs to discuss commercialization in detail. The discussions were cordial and productive. The USG recognized the sovereign right of the GOH to use the strip for commercial purposes, both parties underscored their mutual interests in maintaining a U.S. military presence at Soto Cano, and we discussed security and protection requirements plus required costs associated with commercializing the strip. The parties agreed

that the only way to commercialize the strip would be to divide the base down the middle of the runway and create separate military and civilian sides. The Hondurans stated that there is no need for further discussions until they can conclude cost feasibility studies.

¶11. (C) Following the meeting, the military component of the Honduran delegation privately told us that they had been forced to call these discussions simply because of political pressures. They do not want to commercialize the base and believe they would be unable to fund the necessary changes, and that any future income from commercialization would not be sufficient to cover these expenses.

¶12. (C) Under this administration, we can expect to continue to receive requests for "re-examining" the issue, especially as Zelaya creeps closer and closer to Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. We believe that Chavez and other left-leaning friends might question Zelaya as to why Honduras has a U.S. base within its borders, and press him to demand more "benefits." (Note: The CHOD told us Honduras' neighbors will do this just because they know the base provides Honduras with such strong security -- a fact they are jealous of. End note.) We have expressed to the GOH that we are open to possible commercial activities in conjunction with military use, but only if certain security, safety, and cost requirements are met. The HOAF understands these issues implicitly, but the politicians and bureaucrats have a harder time understanding the issues. Despite this, after a thorough briefing with ample time for questions and answers, we were able to address the concerns of the bureaucrats present at the last round of talks, and are confident that we could do the same if the issue were to arise again in the future.

Conclusion

¶13. (C) Honduras is increasingly being used as a transit point for trafficking in arms, drugs, and persons. It has not yet reached the status of a "narco-state" but with its extremely weak justice and law enforcement institutions, endemic corruption, remote and isolated areas that are a natural haven for traffickers, and a recent crack down on organized crime in Mexico, Honduras is an attractive alternative for organized crime to flourish. U.S. assistance will help improve Honduras' ability to interdict the transshipment of drugs and arms, address the increase in violence fueled by the organized crime and gangs, and respond to natural disasters. Through the proposed Merida Initiative, we hope to provide funds for prison upgrades, judicial reform, anti-gang programs, and anti-drug operational support. We will not be successful, however, unless the GOH demonstrates the political will to sustain programs that will ultimately improve security for the Honduran people.

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